

# Keys To Managing Pain

## (How Anyone Can Learn To Manage Pain)

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In this article I will introduce you to a simple but effective approach that just about anyone can use to manage pain, without the use of pain medications, or in cases of severe pain, with minimal use of pain medications.

### **Background**

First, let's address some common misconceptions about pain. The title of this article really should not have the phrase "pain management" in it. The whole concept of "pain management" is based on the idea that pain is something we experience and that our primary goal is to manage or even eliminate it. It is understandable that we accept this as a basic assumption, since we are bombarded for most of our lives with subtle but powerful messages that implant and then continually reinforce the idea.

Notice how many TV commercials are all about how to make sure that we get rid of pain as quickly as possible? Do we ever get the message that pain may have a function or be useful? No, I am not some masochist who enjoys pain, but I have learned that pain has its uses and its reasons. And I have also learned that understanding the uses and reasons for pain is the starting point for working with pain.

In this article we will learn how to eliminate pain in some cases and to minimize it in others. I promise that. But first, we need to understand the function and uses of pain. If we look carefully at the human organism, we see a marvelous living being, which is the result of some of the most awesome design in the known Universe. There are not many parts of a human being, if any, that do not have a purpose. Pain is no exception.

### **Pain's Purpose**

Let's look at some of the uses of pain. An obvious one is to help us avoid immediate injury. If I touch a hot stove that I do not know is hot, I experience pain and am prompted to move my hand away as quickly as possible. Can you imagine what it would be like, safety-wise, to work in a kitchen if we could not experience pain?

Here's an example what happens when that pain is not available. The consequences are serious: Often people with diabetes lose sensation in their feet and toes due to the nerve damage that diabetes frequently causes. It is common for such people to experience serious burns on their lower extremities from such ordinary devices as heating pads, electric blankets, etc. This happens because their diabetes-impaired circulation does not transfer and spread out the heat as readily as it normally would, and also because they cannot feel the pain that a person with normal sensation would

feel. So they do not respond to the initial burning until it has become very serious. From this example, we can see that pain is a way that our bodies communicate valuable information to us. The pain prompts us to modify our immediate behavior in ways that are vital to our physical safety.

But what about chronic pain, such as a backache, or a sore knee or wrist? What function does that pain serve? Really, it is the same as the pain from a hot stove. The chronic pain is still our body using its best tool to communicate vital information that we need for our safety.

Let's take the example of a painful back: What information does that communicate? It tells us that something is wrong with our back and that we may need to modify our behavior or obtain more information. Perhaps I had planned to play golf this weekend, but I woke up Saturday morning and noticed that my back was sore. This could be from having lifted something a little too heavy earlier in the week and from having strained some muscles in my back. Unless the pain is so minor as to be barely noticeable, the chances are that I will postpone my golf date. If the muscle strain were there, but I had no pain to let me know it was there, I would be at risk of going ahead with my golfing plans and turning a very minor injury into a serious and possibly long-term injury.

Or, in some cases, pain may prompt us to seek help with some condition that requires treatment. I'm sure you can think of many similar examples from your life experience where pain informed you that something in your body needed your attention.

From these examples we can clearly see that responding to all pain by immediately seeking to suppress it can be a dangerous practice. It is not healthy for us unless we hold huge amounts of stock in the pharmaceutical companies! And then it would only be financially healthy – still not healthy physically, emotionally or spiritually.

### **What Might Be A More Healthy Response To Pain?**

Although pain is a primary means that our body uses to communicate critical information to us, that does not mean that we need to suffer great amounts of pain and stoically bear it. So what can we do since suppressing pain out-of-hand is not in our best interest, and yet we don't want to experience severe or prolonged pain?

*What if we could extract the information from the pain, and then lower it to a level that is very easy to live with?* That is what this article is really all about.

First, there is another commonly-held wrong assumption about pain that we need to correct: Most of us are taught that we cannot control the amount of pain that we experience without using powerful medications. Of course, we know about advanced

Yoga practitioners, experts in hypnosis and other extraordinary people who can do things that would overwhelm us with pain and yet they seem not to experience any pain. But that is not what I am talking about here. Instead, this article provides some very simple techniques that anyone can quickly master and use. Of course, the more we use them the better we will become in their use. But even a complete beginner can immediately exercise an amazing degree of control over any pain they may be experiencing.

### **Controlling Our Pain:**

Let's begin learning how to use these methods with several simple exercises. Here's the first one:

Imagine that we can rate the intensity of pain on a scale of one to ten. A 1 is pain that is so slight it is barely noticeable and a 10 is the very worst pain imaginable. Now imagine a round dial much like a clock face, but with a zero where the 12 would be, and a 10 just counter-clockwise from the zero by one position.

Imagine that there is a pointer that can spin and point to various positions on our dial face. It may be helpful to close your eyes and visualize this dial so that you can see it without distractions and make it as real as possible in your imagination. Now we have a dial to indicate the intensity of any pain that we feel, starting with a zero for no pain at all when the pointer is pointing straight up, and rotating clockwise to a 1 for barely perceptible pain, and proceeding to maximum pain, which is a 10 on our dial.

If you are experiencing any noticeable pain we can use it for this exercise. If not, think about the different parts of your body and see if there is an area that has even a small amount of pain that we can use. Or, if not, you can simply think back to a time when you felt a pain.

Next, quantify the pain on the dial. Visualize the pointer actually pointing to the number on the dial that corresponds to the intensity of the pain.

Let's suppose that your pain is at level 3 – not overwhelming, but enough to be uncomfortable and distracting from other things that you might want to pay attention to. I'm going to ask you to do something that seems counter-intuitive, but please trust me and try it. In your imagination, reach out to the dial and raise the pain one level. Just use your mind to move the pointer to the next highest level. So if your pain is at a level 4, push it to level 5. Just hold it there for a second or two. Now release your hold on the pointer.

Did you notice anything interesting? In almost all cases, the level that the pain adjusts to when you release your hold on the pointer is at least one level below where it was before you raised it. You may need to try this exercise several times in order to experience it and to assure yourself that you really can control your pain, at least to some extent. If you are having difficulty with this exercise, I recommend doing it in a quiet space that is free of distractions.

This was just a simple exercise to demonstrate that you already have at least some control over your pain. But rest assured that this article is not about some sort of mind-over-matter stunt to block out your pain. I have much more useful and powerful techniques to share with you. If you found the exercise difficult, then I recommend you do it a number of times until it becomes easy for you. In fact, if you are heading into a situation where you anticipate some pain, such as a surgery or medical procedure, it will be valuable for you practice it in advance.

### **Taking Pain Control To The Next Level:**

Are you ready for the good stuff? In the exercise above we demonstrated that our conscious minds have at least some ability to control our pain. And the more we practice that simple exercise the more control we will acquire over any pain.

But another part of the mind, our unconscious mind, has far more dramatic and powerful control over our pain. If we can enlist the power of our unconscious mind, we can make huge changes in pain levels.

Not only can the unconscious mind lower our pain, but it can also help us learn what the pain is there to tell us much more precisely than can usually be done via the conscious mind. In fact, I have found that the best way is to do both at once – gain the information that the pain is there to tell us, and drop the pain level.

Here's the method I use for doing this: I begin a dialog with the part of me that hurts. This can be an imaginary dialog that is done silently, or one spoken out loud. Choose whichever way is more comfortable for you.

In this dialog I refer to my conscious mind as "me", and I talk directly with the part of my body that is in pain. The dialog begins with me acknowledging the pain. Then I ask for the information that the pain is there to communicate to me. A typical one goes something like this:

"Well, knee, I notice that something is wrong. I am feeling the pain that you are sending me. What do you want me to know?"

Then I wait quietly for a response. Often enough the answer floats into my conscious mind, something like this:

“When you walked down that steep flight of stairs yesterday, carrying that big pile of books, you strained your knee. The pain is there to let you know that you need to take it easy for a day or two so I can heal.”

Then I use active listening to confirm what I have heard: “I understand that I strained my knee when I walked down those steep stairs, carrying all those books. And now you want me to take it easy for a few days. Have I got that right?”

Again I wait quietly for a response: “Yes, that’s right.”

Or sometimes I will get a slight correction or some more detail, for example: “The ligaments on the inside of your knee have been strained. You need to take it easy for a few days so that they can heal”

And sometimes I even get instructions: “Keep your leg elevated as much as possible for a day or two.”

Sometimes the dialog is not that literal. Sometimes I just ask the question about what’s wrong and the information emerges in my consciousness. And as I have shared this technique with many people I have heard many varying descriptions of how the information shows up. However it happens is just right for you. Don’t worry if no explicit information becomes conscious for you. As long as you have asked and genuinely listened, you are ready for the next step.

### **Negotiating The Pain Level:**

Now that I have the information that the pain was there to tell me, I am ready to drop the pain level. Here’s how I do it: I enter into a negotiation with the part of me that is hurting.

Typically it goes something like this: “Well, knee, right now the pain is at about a level five. If I agree to rest and take it easy on my knee will you drop the pain down to a level one?”

Notice that I do not ask to have the pain completely gone. I want the small, low-level pain in the background so that I remember to take it easy and do not overdue it.

If my knee agrees to drop the pain level down to a one, then I negotiate the time frame.

Here's a sample: "OK, so I will take it easy and you will drop the pain level down to a one. After four hours you can bring the pain back so that I am prompted to check in with you again. Then we can see if there is any new information or if I need to do something else for you to heal. Is this OK?"

This always seems to work. Sure enough, the pain drops down to the one for four hours and shows up again right on time at a high enough level to get my attention. It does not always come back to the original level. During the time the pain was down something may have changed so that my knee is either better or worse, so the pain comes back at a new level that corresponds to the current state of my knee. This is entirely appropriate and desirable.

When the pain returns, I go through the dialog again to find new information and negotiate a new agreement.

### **How Can This Work?**

If this all sounds a little wild or "far out" to you, it may help to take a brief look at what is probably going on behind the scenes. If I look at things from a Western Cultural perspective, it seems unlikely that my knee is actually "talking" with me. Rather my symbolic and imaginary dialog is just a simple way to allow me to have a dialog with my subconscious, which controls many things in my body, including pain perception.

Other cultures may view this and explain it differently. But regardless of how it is explained, it really seems to work as long as I do it with integrity.

What does it mean to do this with integrity? Two things:

1. I honestly want to know what the pain is there to tell me.
2. When I make a commitment to alter my behavior in response to the information, I must honor that commitment.

If I break my promise, the next time I try to use the technique it will not work well. After several broken promises it will not work at all. I suspect that my subconscious decides my word is not to be trusted and no longer believes me so it will not lower the pain level. This makes sense if you realize that the primary job of the subconscious is to preserve us and keep us safe. If it knows that my promise to take it easy is not to be trusted, then it concludes that it needs to keep the pain level high enough so that I will be forced by the pain to take it easy. On the other hand, if it knows that I will keep my word then lowering the pain level does not put my physical safety at risk so it is willing to cooperate with my request to lower the pain level.

You may feel a bit awkward and even silly the first few times you try this. After all, it is not every day that one “talks” with a part of their body. However I have shared this technique with many people over the years. Those who try this and really are sincere in their efforts report that it works. If you are having trouble making this work for you and pain control is an issue in your life, consider getting a friend, colleague, or even a professional coach to help you through the process at least a few times, until you achieve some level of success. I am happy to work with anyone who wishes for some help in learning to use this technique.

I think most good coaches can read this article and then help you through the process, even if they are initially unfamiliar with the technique. Once you have achieved even a small amount of success with this, you are on your way. The more you use this method the more effective it becomes and the easier it is to do. This is one case where practice really does makes perfect.

### **One More Powerful Pain Control Concept:**

I have one more valuable pain control concept to share with you. Most of the time in Western Culture, we are taught that pain is bad and that it is something to be avoided at all costs. We are taught, I'll even say brainwashed, into believing that an important goal in life is to be 100% pain-free. Even more problematic is that we are taught that pain is something to be feared. Along with this, we have been trained to flee from all pain – to run away from it as fast as we can.

I have learned from my Native American teachers that this is exactly the wrong thing to do with most pain. When I try to run from my pain, I increase my fear response, which just makes it hurt more. Instead, my Native American teachers have urged me to always move towards the pain and to embrace it as closely as I can. This may seem counterintuitive, but I find that when I move toward the pain and even embrace it, my fear of the pain lessens dramatically. Just lowering my fear response automatically causes my pain level to drop, often quite dramatically.

Once I have lowered my fear level, it is much easier to effectively use the techniques described in this article, as well as any other pain control methods you may wish to combine with them.

When I have delivered this information in workshops, I have been able to field a number of questions. Since you are receiving this information from this article and we cannot interact in real time, I have listed Frequently Asked Questions along with answers below. Also, my e-mail address is listed at the end of this article. I welcome your questions, feedback and comments. If you try the techniques presented in this article, I would greatly appreciate hearing of your experience.

## Frequently Asked Questions

1. What if my pain level is very high, like maybe an eight or nine? Can I still use this approach?

*I think that depends on the individual. I find that when I have pain that is above 7, I am unable to do this. It seems that for me a pain level above 7 is so pervasive in my consciousness that I am not able to focus on anything else, such as using these techniques.*

2. So what do I do if the pain is so high that I cannot use this approach?

*I use conventional pain killers at that point. I don't believe there is any value in self-torture, nor is there virtue in pretending to be some kind of tough guy. So when the pain is that high, I yell for drugs. But then, I only use the drugs as long as I need to in order to get the pain down to the level where I can start to use this approach. I still want the information that the pain is there to tell me. But first I need to get the pain down to a level where I can concentrate and think clearly enough to use these techniques.*

*Also, I avoid the over-the-counter "NSAID" drugs like Tylenol. Most of them, if not all of them, pose great risks of serious liver damage. This can occur in some people even when used in relatively low doses and for short periods of time. Furthermore, I find that if I have that much pain, they are mostly not strong enough to be effective. For those rare situations when my pain level is that high, I use serious pain medication, usually opium derivatives. Used properly, I think these are very safe and they are effective.*

*One more important consideration in using any form of chemical pain medication: Again, I am NOT against using these. There are times when they are absolutely wonderful and completely appropriate. However, keep in mind that almost all of them not only lower the pain levels that we feel or that we perceive, they also slow the metabolism and slow down the pace at which we heal! That's right-- they tend to slow down our healing. I have observed this over and over again, especially in the case of healing bone fractures, cuts and surgical incisions. So I recommend using chemicals to control pain as little as possible while still keeping your physical comfort at an acceptable level. And I would stop using them altogether as soon as your pain level is low enough to make that practical. If you have been using them for awhile, or if you have been using a particularly strong form of pain medication, you may need or benefit from some professional assistance in tapering off the use and then getting all of the way off the pain medications.*



3. Can I combine this technique with other forms of pain management?

*Of course! In the answer to question number 2 above, I imply that for very severe pain I have used drugs and these techniques. In situations involving severe pain the combination can work very well. Also, sometimes I have combined these techniques with acupuncture, self-hypnosis, as well as other means of pain control. In fact, for chronic pain and/or severe pain such combined approaches are often best. Just remember to keep in mind that you always want the information that the pain is there to tell you.*

4. What about someone who is terminal with a painful disease such as cancer? Are these techniques for them?

*That depends. It really is an individual choice. We all respond to pain differently. And we have many different notions of how we want to navigate the ends of our lives in these bodies. Some people prefer to use lots of pain medication so that they do not suffer needlessly. But that is often at the cost of being much less alert and conscious. And that type of pain is often severe enough, especially in the end stages, so that it would generally be very difficult to get through it with any dignity and grace without a lot of pain medication. Of course, in that situation the prospect of chemical addiction is completely irrelevant. Some people in such situations opt to combine drugs, acupuncture, self-hypnosis and these techniques, or any combination of techniques. Whatever works! Again, I don't see any particular virtue in subjecting oneself to unnecessary pain.*

5. Are there ways I can enhance these tools and get even better results?

*Absolutely! I often use quiet, soothing music in the background to help me focus and to create a sort of "private space" around myself. For more severe pain I also sometimes use self-hypnosis combined with these techniques. When dealing with more severe pain I have a self-hypnosis CD that I listen to just before I use these techniques. That helps me to relax and to focus on using the techniques. Sometimes I also listen again when I am done with the techniques. That helps me to "anchor" the new, lower pain level. (The self-hypnosis also can aid in and speed healing from whatever is causing the pain.)*

*I encourage you to use your imagination and creativity to think of other ways to enhance the techniques and get even better results for yourself. If you come up with anything not described in this article that works especially well for you, I would appreciate hearing about it. I can then share your discovery with others who may need it.*

6. Are these other things I need to know about pain management?

*That depends. If pain is a frequent aspect of your life, spending some time and energy learning more probably makes sense. Or if you just find the subject interesting and find yourself attracted to learning more, then you certainly can. There is much more that you can learn. But I think that for most people the information in this article is sufficient to quite effectively manage most pain.*

7. You mention a self-hypnosis approach to pain management. Can you be more specific?

*Yes. I began using an audio recording called: "Rapid Pain Control", which colleague gave me shortly after a severe accident I had in 1989. (More about that below.) This was created by Carol Erickson, (daughter of Milton Ericson, a major figure in the development of hypnosis and hypnotic therapy), and Tom Condon. It uses an innovative approach, called: "multi-evocational hypnosis", where two or more voices speak at once, simultaneously saying different things. This has dramatic effects for many people when it comes to pain control. I found it to be extremely helpful in managing pain during my recovery from my 1989 accident. It also seems to accelerate healing for many people who use it. I believe it helped me to heal more quickly, as well. You can use my contact information below to request more information about this valuable pain control resource.*

8. Are there any other important pain management secrets you can share with us?

Yes. This is one I learned about fairly recently. If you know anything about Chinese Traditional Medicine then you know that a prime principal is that there are energy meridians that run all through the body. In most cases these correspond to the paths of the major neurological structures in the human body. Most of these meridians are routed through the jaw. (Modern, Western anatomy is finally beginning to confirm that there is a high concentration of nerve branches that run through the human jaw.) It turns out that brushing one's teeth with organic sulfur in the form of very high-quality MSM crystals can quickly and dramatically lower pain levels. The effect can be noticed in as little as a few seconds. Further detail in the use of this technique is beyond the scope of this article. Feel free to contact me for details, or check out this blog post:

<http://myhealthoptimizer.com/?p=2259>

9. What are your qualifications to help people with pain management and how did you learn these techniques for pain management?

*I was fortunate to have several Native American elders as teachers and important role models in my early life. From them I began learning some of these principles and techniques while still a child. Also, I began racing bicycles at an early age. As a competitive athlete, engaged in intensive training and long endurance events, I had a real need for pain management. To compete and yet avoid injury I really needed to be able to tell the difference between pain from fatigued muscles and something potentially more serious. So being able to ask what information any given pain might have for me became very important in my daily life.*

*Then in 1989 I was hit by a car and had a near-death experience. My injuries were severe, disabling and painful. I spent 3 years rehabbing and escaping from what was supposed to be a lifelong “sentence” to a wheel chair. My recovery included numerous reconstructive surgeries that were often quite painful. This experience compelled me to become even more proficient at pain management. I have been sharing these and other pain management techniques with people ever since.*

These are the most common questions I hear at my workshops.

Please remember that regardless of what techniques and approaches you use that pain is a source of important information. It is usually important to learn what the specific information is.

Please feel free to send *your* questions or comments to: [jeff@myhealthoptimizer.com](mailto:jeff@myhealthoptimizer.com)

To your great health!

*Jeff Bell*

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